

***Developing intercultural communication in the EFL  
primary education classroom: Internationalization through  
virtual team collaboration with eTwinning***

***Desarrollo de la comunicación intercultural en inglés como  
lengua extranjera en educación primaria:  
Internacionalización a través de la colaboración virtual en  
equipo con eTwinning***

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**Abstract:** According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the intercultural competence is one of the aspects that must be developed as part of the communicative competence in a foreign language. Two groups of students in their 6th year of Primary Education work on a pollution project through English as the vehicular language. The experimental group works in collaboration with students from a school in Poland through the eTwinning tool. The control group performs the same tasks, but with working teams formed by students from the same classroom. After the project, both groups conducted a questionnaire about their awareness regarding intercultural communicative competence. Results reveal that the group that worked in collaboration with the international students developed their intercultural competence more than the other group. Collaboration with students from another country—which has been possible through eTwinning—seems to have contributed to the development of this competence.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication; ICT; foreign language; primary education.

**Resumen:** De acuerdo con el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia (MCER), la competencia intercultural es uno de los aspectos que se deben desarrollar como parte de la competencia comunicativa en una lengua extranjera. Dos grupos de alumnos de 6º de Educación Primaria trabajan en un proyecto sobre contaminación utilizando el inglés como lengua vehicular. El grupo experimental trabaja en colaboración con alumnos de un centro de Polonia a través de la herramienta eTwinning. Por su parte, el grupo de control realiza las mismas tareas, pero con equipos de trabajo formados por alumnos del mismo aula. Tras el proyecto, ambos grupos realizaron una encuesta de percepción sobre diversos aspectos relacionados con la competencia intercultural. Los resultados muestran que el grupo que trabajó con los alumnos polacos ha evolucionado más en su competencia intercultural que el grupo control. La colaboración con alumnos de otro país, que ha sido posible a través de eTwinning, parece haber contribuido al desarrollo de esta competencia.

**Palabras clave:** comunicación intercultural; TIC; lengua extranjera; educación primaria.

# I

## ntroduction

Education should not be understood as something isolated from the society in which we live (Ibáñez-Martín, 2007). In fact, the school is —or should be — the reflection of the society we want to build, formed by free citizens, entrepreneurs and with a critical spirit, open to the world. Nowadays we can no longer speak of Spain as a mere nation, but as part of a larger European structure. That is, Spain is an active member of the European Union (EU) and, as such, arises as a part of an international network in a globalized world. But the society of the 21st century is more than globalized; it is interconnected and complex, where the profile of a monolingual citizen is disappearing in favour of citizens who are capable of communicating in more than one language (Martínez-Pasamar, 2005).

The EU aspires to create a society of citizens with a European conscience, a society based on the free movement of people, where communication is essential for a social cohesion. Hence, the learning of at least one foreign language (FL) is fundamental in the training of 21st

century citizens. In fact, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2018) –hereafter CEFR– mentions cultural awareness as one of the goals in FL learning, and the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as one of the aspects to be developed by the learner.

By the end of the 20th century the need to master at least one FL was made evident by the Spanish education laws. This learning has focused on the grammar, vocabulary and the oral and written skills. However, some aspects related to the culture and pragmatics linked to that FL have been pushed into the background. Consequently, students usually finish their compulsory education with a considerable level of vocabulary, grammar and oral and written skills, but they miss an important intercultural part which complements it.

Alptekin (2002, p. 58) states that “learning a FL becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view”. In this sense, FL learning should go beyond the mere acquisition of linguistic forms, and promote the use of these forms taking into account intercultural aspects. In Sercu’s words (2002, p. 62), “it seems natural to try and raise awareness in learners of the fact that people speaking other languages may also organize and perceive the world in ways which are different from their own”.

At the same time, Bozdag (2015, p. 14) warns that “the relationship between ICTs, globalization of schools, and intercultural networks remains an understudied issue”. In order to contribute to this branch of research, the present study focuses on this topic trying to combine the digital tool eTwinning and its use in the development of the (ICC) among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students.

## **1.- Literature Review**

### **1. 1.- *Intercultural communication and telecollaboration***

Nowadays, there is a certain degree of agreement among researchers about the concept of "communicative competence". Yet, the

word "competence" has been one of the most controversial issues within the field of Applied Linguistics. Chomsky (1985) was one of the first scholars who used this term in opposition to what he called "performance". He defined "competence" as the linguistic knowledge owned by the speaker (Chomsky, 1985). However, it was Hymes (1972) who decided to link "competence" with communication and used the term "communicative competence", since he believed it was a more accurate and realistic concept for language teaching.

Already in the 80s, Canale and Swain (1980) understood communicative competence as the synthesis combining a cognitive system, linguistic knowledge and skills for effective communication in a language. The way in which they understood communicative competence comprises three types of knowledge: grammatical principles, knowledge about how to use language in a given social context, and knowledge about how to combine different statements and ideas according to discourse principles. In addition, they distinguished between the use of that knowledge in a situation of real communication and its presence in a communicative act.

However, authors such as Savignon (1972), Bachman and Palmer (1996) or Skehan (1998) emphasize the dynamic nature of communicative competence, as opposed to a static character, considering it as something more interpersonal than intrapersonal. Following this conception, Savignon (1972) defines communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative scenario, that is, in a dynamic exchange in which said competence must adapt to the informational framework of one or several interlocutors" (p. 8).

Based on the ideas discussed above, several models of communicative competence have been suggested. One of the most influential is proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996). They divide their model into two aspects, that is, the linguistic knowledge and the strategic-communicative ability. The former involves organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. The organizational knowledge comprises grammar (vocabulary, syntax, phonology) and text

(cohesion, coherence, rhetoric). Regarding pragmatic knowledge, they talk about the functional (manipulation, cultural references) and the sociolinguistic (dialect, register) knowledge. On the other hand, they conceive the strategic part of the model as a set of metacognitive components that allow the individuals to establish the communicative objective, evaluate the resources to be achieved and plan their actions in that act of communication.

A much more recent model is the one that is exposed in the CEFR (2018), particularly oriented to the process of language teaching and learning. Accordingly, the communicative competence comprises three basic components: the linguistic competence, sociolinguistics and pragmatics. However, each component includes both content and the ability to apply that content. Thus, linguistic competence refers to the knowledge and the ability to use linguistic resources to form well-structured messages.

The CEFR also contemplates the so called (ICC) as one of its components. The term “intercultural” is defined by Gagnestam (2003) as a frame for collaboration between people from different cultural contexts. The CEFR (2018) highlights the importance of promoting plurilingual and intercultural education. In fact, Deardoff (2006) considers the intercultural interaction as one of the most important aspects of the communicative competence. The role of the culture in FL learning is remarked by Sercu (2002), since bringing a FL into the classroom means contacting students with a culturally different world to their own.

Byram (1997) is one of the authors that has paid special attention to the intercultural aspect in FL learning. He developed a model with five different components or *savoirs* that the FL student should acquire in order to be interculturally competent: knowledge, attitudes, interpreting and relating skills, discovery skills and interaction and critical cultural awareness. In Byram’s words, these *savoirs* comprehend “knowledge about social groups and their cultures in one’s own country, and similar knowledge of the interlocutor’s country, on the one hand; knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual

and societal levels, on the other hand” (1997, p. 35). In a similar vein, Huang, Rayner and Zhuang (2003) affirm that someone that is interculturally competent can develop relationships with people from different cultures, manage to solve complicated conflicts by crossing the barriers that arise as a result of cultural differences, and improve their ability to communicate with counterparts from different cultures.

Chen and Starosta (1999, p. 28) define “intercultural communication competence” as “the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other’s cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment”. These authors argue that the ICC is comprised of three key components: intercultural sensitivity (affective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process). One of the differences with Byram’s proposal is affect, that is, intercultural competence goes beyond knowing about one’s own culture and the others’, and it also concerns affect and emotions. In the same line, Wiseman’s (2001) definition of this concept involves motivation, together with knowledge and skills. The author acknowledges that the learner needs motivation to interact effectively with other people, as motivation is “the set of feelings, intentions, needs and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication” (p.4).

Some studies have dealt with the ICC from different perspectives. In her study at the Beijing University, Griffiths (2011) explored the performance of EFL students as regards intercultural competence. She could observe that most of those students showed a low level of ICC. Similarly, Hao and Zhang (2009) found out that Chinese students that had been involved with the English language for more than 12 years were unable to be communicatively competent when interacting in intercultural contexts. In this line, Penbek, Yurkadul and Cerit (2009) carried out a study where participants proved to increase their level of ICC with international interactions. They recommend the promotion of this type of experiences so that students can be not just linguistically competent but also culturally competent in the FL. Accordingly, scholars such as Anderson et al. (2006), Gao and

Kennedy (2019), or Kitsantas and Meyers (2002) reported promising results about the improvement of cultural awareness in FL students spending some time abroad and interacting with native speakers of that FL.

More recent research has revealed how ICC has been built through virtual team collaboration. Thus, O'Dowd (2016) recommends virtual collaboration as a way to internationalize the curriculum with minimum costs. This type of interaction is gaining importance among teaching models. This is the case of Crawford et al. (2019) who developed a project where university students of Economics from Scotland, Germany and Portugal worked together through a common virtual platform in order to carry out different tasks related to their degree. The authors could observe that experiential international classroom projects using this kind of collaboration increased intercultural sensitivity and ICC in those students. Similarly, Üzümlü et al. (2020) highlight how telecollaboration among teacher trainees exerted a positive effect in their motivation and intercultural communication. In the lights of their results, they claim that “intercultural exchange projects through telecollaboration promote participants’ intercultural communicative competence” (p.3).

### *1. 2.- eTwinning and FL learning*

The learning of FLs with the help of new technologies dates back to the 60s, when there is a significant increase in the interest of computer-assisted teaching. Warschauer and Healey (1998) highlight some of the benefits that the use of technologies can bring, especially the computer and the Internet connection. Among them we find multimodal practice with almost immediate feedback, access to a great diversity of resources, individualized learning, collaborative work in network, besides the game-like factor that many of the applications usually present.

Already in the 21st century, we could define our time as the era of knowledge society, where technologies play an increasingly important role in all areas of our life. All educational sectors insist on



the relevance and need for innovation and appeal to an effort for renewal. González (2008) urges the incorporation of ICT strategies into the teaching-learning process, given their innovating role. In this sense, Kampylis et al. (2012: 18) state that "the connectivity provided by new technologies is key for learning". In the same line, Gértrudix (2006) considers adamant evidence the fact that there is a progressive and dramatic increase of users connected to the Web 2.0, which allows to develop work strategies, collaboration and research through distributed groups that carry out their exchanges using assisted telematic systems.

This possibility of collaborating through technologies is called "multimedia convergence". Villanueva (2000) argues it is a new revolutionary trend of mass media. In fact, Gértrudix (2006) clarifies that in order for multimedia convergence to occur there should exist systems which are ready for exchanging information.

The so-called eTwinning is a popular ICT tool among teachers and students all over Europe. Vuorikari et al. (2012) define it as a platform based on the creation of a virtual community for schools in Europe, which promotes the development of different skills of students, teachers and other school agents in terms of FL communication, digital competence, and interpersonal and the intercultural knowledge.

There are different modalities of collaboration within an eTwinning project. This collaboration can be given between teaching centers, teachers or students from different institutions. The only condition is that stakeholders belong to different European countries. Collaboration between centers usually occurs with long-term projects where the entire educational community of these centers participates. It is usually done through the European program Socrates. In the case of teachers, Mercadal (2004) mentions the most relevant options: one of them is given among teachers who share the same area of knowledge or work on the same subject; another modality is found among teachers of different areas who combine them in an interdisciplinary project.

Most eTwinning literature recommends the implementation of this tool in different contexts and subject areas (Merlos and Guerrero,

2011; Paré and Soto, 2017). Paré and Soto (2017) suggest a collaborative proposal among teachers combining face-to-face and online interactions with eTwinning, remarking the positive outcomes for the teaching action as a result of these. Merlos and Guerrero (2011) advocate for the use of eTwinning as an instrument of professional development among teachers. The teachers who participated in their project reported significant improvement in several teaching techniques and digital skills to be applied in contexts other than those related to eTwinning.

The studies on eTwinning in the FL classroom are usually framed within the motivational aspect and social development. Carvalho (2007) and Fernández (2008) remark how students' motivation to learn FLs significantly increased after their participation in an eTwinning project. In a similar vein, Pereira and Rocha (2007) carried out a project where secondary school students were immersed in the eTwinning experience for a whole semester. Students' ICT competence and collaborative skills were measured. Results showed that participants improved their basic ICT and intercommunicative skills among their equals. As a support of these results, Sundqvist and Olin-Scheller (2013) found out that using eTwinning in the FL classroom can help teachers fight against discouragement and lack of motivation among secondary school students.

The use of eTwinning and other ways of telecollaboration have proved to be efficient in the development of communicative skills and some formal aspects of the FL learning process (Martínez, 2012). Angelova and Zhao (2016) tested the grammatical use of 26 Chinese university students after taking part in a project with USA students. They used e-mail, Skype and a virtual discussion board to interact. After the project, Chinese students had improved their grammar use specially word order. Bueno-Alastuey and Kleban (2016) compared Polish and Spanish teacher trainees sharing English as their FL. They used telecollaboration to carry out a project where English was the lingua franca. Outcomes pointed towards positive effects in some written and oral aspects in the participants' FL.

Despite there being a lack of studies that combine eTwinning and intercultural awareness, some exceptions are found. Camilleri (2016) interviewed a group of teachers who had worked with eTwinning in order to know their opinions about this tool and intercultural awareness in students. Most of the interviewees acknowledged the relevant role of eTwinning and telecollaboration with people from other countries in the development of intercultural awareness. De Miguel (2017) analyses how ICC is developed through the use of eTwinning in Bachillerato students of French. They were organized in small groups and interacted in virtual social forums. They exchanged opinions and corrected each other's oral performances. This activity contributed to improving their level of ICC. Bozdag (2018) presented a case study where a German and a Turkish school participated in an eTwinning project. The author explored the role of the different agents involved, particularly teachers and students. The study highlights the obstacles when introducing this type of programs in some social contexts. Even though students achieved some level of intercultural awareness, there is a claim for integral programs which go beyond a specific subject or group, but the whole teaching institution. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done in terms of research and the effects of eTwinning on the development of the ICC. This study aims to shed some light on this issue.

## **2.- Aim of the study**

As commented above, telecollaboration between FL learners of different cultures has been used to promote their language learning. Yet, leaving aside some exceptions the use of telecollaboration, particularly eTwinning, is relatively new as regards the development of ICC, especially in low levels. The present study aims to find out if telecollaboration through eTwinning with students from another country improves students' intercultural communicative awareness within the Primary Education scope.

### **3.- Methodology**

#### *3.1.- Participants*

Thirty-eight twelve-year-old EFL students took part in the study. Their level of English was elementary and they were in their sixth year of Primary Education. They all belonged to the same state school located in the city of Madrid.

Their mother language was Spanish and had studied EFL since they were six. None of them had extra lessons or studied any other language. Students were divided in two groups, but were taught by the same English teacher. The fact that the same teacher controlled both groups was neutralized because she did not know the aim of the study. She was just asked to work some English content with the children by using different types of activities in each group.

Eighteen students were included in an experimental group and the other twenty students were included in the control group. The students' level of English was similar. The experimental group worked within what is called an eTwinning learning, whereas the control group followed the usual communicative teaching methodology, without the use of eTwinning. The working teams of the experimental group were mixed, that is to say, they were composed of Spanish and Polish students. By contrast, the working teams in the control groups were formed only by students from the Spanish school.

There was a third group of students who participated in the project as necessary collaborators to carry out the eTwinning experiment. They belonged to a state school in Cracow, Poland, and were also in their sixth academic year of Elementary school. The Polish students were the ones that took part of the eTwinning learning event interacting with the experimental group and co-working with them, but they were not assessed.

### *3.2.- Task design and procedure*

Both the experimental and the control group worked with the same project and activities. The difference was that the experimental group did it within an eTwinning learning event in collaboration with Polish students. The project was developed within the subject of EFL in collaboration with the area of Social Science. It consisted of suggesting measures to fight against problems caused by different types of pollution. Students in groups of three or four had to discuss about possible solutions to prevent air pollution, water pollution and soil pollution. The project took four weeks and was developed into four sessions of 90 minutes each, except for the last one, which took 120 minutes given that all the teams –those in the experimental group and also in the control group– had to do an oral presentation.

In the case of the eTwinning learning event, there was an extra session, where students did not participate. It was called the zero session, since it took place before carrying out the project itself with the students. In this session the teacher in Spain and the teacher in Poland met virtually in the eTwinning space to discuss the contents of the project and the type of student grouping. Previously, both teachers had enrolled in the eTwinning platform.

In the first session students watched a video about pollution. Both language and images were adapted to the students' age. The video aimed to contextualize the topic to be addressed in the project and activated the mental mechanisms of the students for the subsequent sessions. After the video, the teacher would moderate a discussion among all the children in the class. She asked open questions about what they had seen in the video.

After that big-group discussion, working teams were organized. They were composed of students from the same class in the case of the control group. In the eTwinning learning event, teams were composed by students from the experimental group and from Poland. The teams had three students, two Spanish and one Polish. Once the teams were

established, a type of pollution (water, air or soil) was assigned to each one.

In the second session, each team had access to a folder with a series of links to some videos where they found information about the type of pollution assigned to them. In order not to overload the students with information, each folder contained two links about the type of pollution that had been assigned and its effects on living beings and the planet in general. The videos took from four to five minutes each, so that the students had enough time to watch them at least twice and were able to devote the rest of the session to oral interaction and the search for solutions to the problem.

The third session consisted of designing a digital poster where the teams had to show the solutions and ideas as a result of the videos and discussions. They used the digital tool Glogster which allowed students from the two countries to work together. The posters were exposed orally in front of the rest of students in the fourth session. In this case, both the experimental and the control group were together in a classroom. Polish students were virtually present too. Students could make questions or suggestions to their classmates about their presentations.

### 3.3.- Instrument

Once the project had been completed, and in order to assess the students' intercultural awareness, a questionnaire was designed *ad hoc*, based on a Likert scale (see table 1). It was written in Spanish so as the language was not an obstacle for students to understand the items. The elements of this questionnaire were based on the parameters found in the CEFR (2018) regarding ICC. Four parameters were selected: i) the ability to bring the source culture and the foreign culture into relation with each other; ii) cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures; iii) the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural

misunderstanding and conflict situations; and iv) the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships.

**Table 1**

Likert-scale to measure ICC

	1	2	3	4	5
La cultura española y otras culturas pueden tener cosas en común					
La cultura española y otras culturas pueden tener cosas distintas					
Utilizaría distintas estrategias para comunicarme con gente de otros países					
Me veo capaz de mediar entre personas de mi país si tienen un conflicto o hay un malentendido					
Me veo capaz de mediar entre una persona de mi país y una de otro país si tienen un conflicto o hay un malentendido					
No creo que todas las personas de mi país sean iguales. Hay diferencias entre nosotros en cuanto a carácter y forma de ser					
No creo que todas las personas de otro país que no es el mío sean iguales. Hay diferencias entre ellos en cuanto a carácter y forma de ser					

Source: author

### *3.4.- Data analysis*

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used. As for descriptive, the numerical means of the Likert scale for each participant were calculated. This allowed us to assign just one figure to each participant. For the inferential statistics the program SPSS was used. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run in order to know whether there

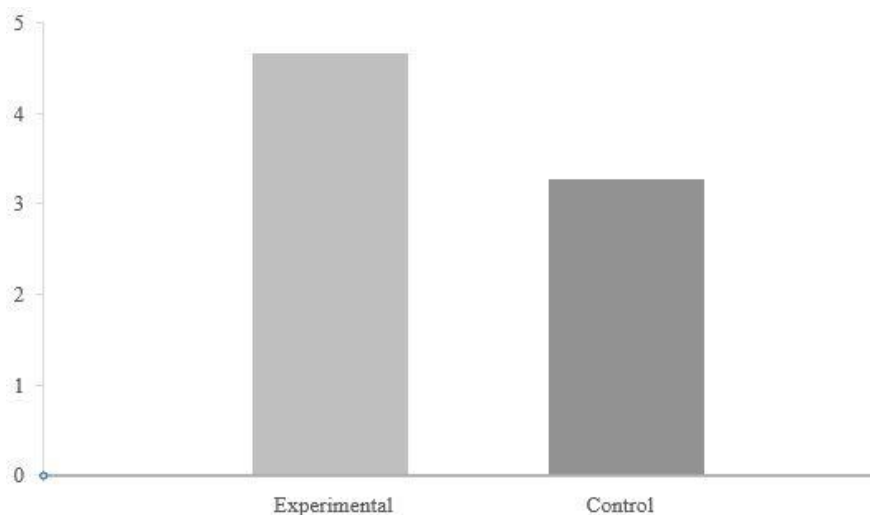
were significant differences between the experimental and the control group in terms of their ICC. According to the research norm in Linguistics, differences were considered significant when  $p < 0.05$ .

#### 4.- Results and discussion

Figure 1 shows that the experimental group scored a mean of 4.67, whereas the average score for the control group only reached 3.27.

**Figure 1**

Means of ICC level



Source: author

In order to know whether this difference is statistically significant, an ANOVA was carried out (see table 2). In this case the critical level associated to  $F(.000)$  is much lower than .05, so that we can reject the null hypothesis that the population means are equal. In other words, the group which worked with eTwinning revealed a higher level of ICC than the other group. Therefore, the differences found in the descriptive analysis are statistically significant.



**Table 2**  
ANOVA test for ICC

	Sum of squares	df	Quadratic mean	F	Sig
Inter-groups	18.652	1	18.652	665.911	0.000
Intra-groups	1.008	36	0.028		
Total	19.661	37			

Source: author

Authors such as Liaw (2006), O'Dowd (2003) and Vinagre (2014) highlight the role of e-learning in the development of ICC. Thus, Gajek (2018, p. 2) states that "it is noteworthy that cultural human values expressed in non-native languages are gained and shared via the Internet". In Liaw's study (2006), students had to read several articles online and write about them in an e-forum. Liaw found that participants could have increased their interest in knowing other people's way of life and their ability to change perspective. O'Dowd (2003) observed that e-mail exchanges helped students to develop their ICC. Similarly, Vinagre (2014) used a wiki as the virtual space where university students could discuss about different cultural and social topics. The results in these studies are in vein with the present study, where the participants who interacted with international students through e-Twinning obtained higher marks in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, these three studies differ from ours in two main aspects. First, the participants' interaction in those studies was asynchronous, that is, it did not take place at the same time. Second, their education level is higher than that of our participants. All of them were university students, whereas our participants were Primary Education students.

Our results also seem to be in line with those in De Miguel (2017), although the participants' level was again different from ours. Two groups of higher education students took part in this experiment. One group had Spanish as their mother tongue and they were learning French as a FL. The other group spoke French and they were learning Spanish. Both groups took place in a project on the eTwinning

platform. After four sessions of telecollaboration, some evidence of intercultural development was found.

In fact, several studies show the impact of eTwinning on students and the school community (Carvahlo, 2007; Crisan, 2013; Gajek, 2018). Carvahlo (2007) could observe the pedagogical value of eTwinning in the construction of openness and tolerance towards other cultures. Crisan (2013) surveyed over 100 teachers about their experience with eTwinning. They remarked the positive benefits of this tool in terms of teaching and learning. They particularly mentioned a significant development of different skills, enriching discussions and opinion exchange. In fact, Gajek (2018, p. 1) claims that the “challenge is to transform international collaboration of selected schools and everyday practice for all learners and teachers”. What is more, she comments on “the benefits of early intercultural experience [...] which is particularly important for children from monolingual regions” (2018, p. 11). This is the case of the participants in our study, who are still in their primary education and belong to a monolingual community. All these works show an improvement in students’ attitudinal aspects not only as regards ICC but also in relation to other intercultural aspects.

The outcomes of the present study suggest that eTwinning may stand as a tool to promote global education. In this sense, Rollin and Harrap (2005) argue that language learning goes beyond memorizing irregular verbs, and that ICT has a major role to play in the process. This idea is shared by Davies and Pike (2009), who remark the importance of training our students in understanding other cultures and developing skills for public life, which includes interacting with people from different parts of the world. In this sense, Camilleri (2016, p. 4) claims for the need to form students as global citizens: “Students today are facing a global society which is interconnected. This necessitates competences in digital and cultural integration skills to become successful global citizens”. She continues acknowledging that communication is considered to contribute to this global education as language comes through culture and students learn about each other by communicating (Camilleri, 2016).

## Conclusions

The European Framework of Reference (2018) presents the ICC as part of the FL student's knowledge to acquire. The present study shows how this competence can be developed through the use of the digital platform eTwinning in the context of Primary Education. This is an example of how to integrate ICT in the FL classroom, going further the language itself, focusing on the ICC, which is a relevant aspect that sometimes adopt a second place.

We cannot deny the existence of an internationalized world, where more than ever effective communication between people is necessary. The FL classroom can become a space which contributes to the students' integral formation, preparing them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The FL should not, therefore, be understood as a mere channel of communication, but as a gateway to other cultures and contexts.

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